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Travels With My Nephew

A memoir
by Dorothy DeMoore

as told to

Guy Wilson

THE WILSONS
ARTS PROJECTS

TRAVELS WITH MY NEPHEW

A Wilsons Arts Project

ISBN - 9789402103953

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Cover design by Franciscus & Franciscus.

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TRAVELS WITH MY NEPHEW

MEETING THE MUSE

One of the biggest thrills of my life was when the great cabaret legend Ms Dorothy DeMoore's people contacted my people to say that Ms DeMoore was interested in meeting me. I had no hesitation in shelving my numerous other projects and embarking on the lengthy negotiations that would lead to meeting the lady.

My people emailed her people to arrange a series of meetings at which they would outline the circumstances in which we might be able to meet. I met my people and then met Ms DeMoore's people. Ms DeMoore met her people and then her representative met one of my people and arranged a telephone conference to draft possible questions which might form the basis of our interviews. Ms DeMoore's legal representative advised her on how she might answer some of these questions without libelling herself and my legal representative emailed me to arrange a meeting at which he advised me on something or other which I've now completely forgotten because by this stage I was totally confused.

I'd had enough. I picked up the phone, dialled the number and got straight through to Ms DeMoore herself.

'I will be your muse if you will be my amanuensis,' she said.

'That sounds wonderful,' I said. 'Whatever it means. Will we need to close the curtains?'

'Mr Wilson,' Ms DeMoore interjected much in the manner of a school teacher I remember with mixed emotions from my childhood. 'Let us be clear that my instinct recommended you to me because I have read your mature and sympathetic treatment of your literary subjects. Please do not disabuse me of either this notion or my own instinct.'

'I apologise most sincerely, Ms DeMoore,' I could hear myself grovelling. 'I assure you that I had no intention of getting off on the wrong foot.'

'Not to worry, my dear,' purred Ms DeMoore. 'I'm accustomed to people being nervous in my presence.'

'Thank you, Ms DeMoore,' I said, abashed and puzzled as to what exactly I was thanking her for.

'The word *amanuensis* is from the Latin,' Ms DeMoore continued in the vein of that previously forgotten teacher. 'The original phrase being *servus ā manū* which literally translates into *slave at hand*'

'You want me to be your slave?' I asked, beginning to seriously consider that possibility. What was it about this woman that made her so persuasive?

'I want your hand to be my slave,' Ms DeMoore responded. She obviously felt my astonishment. 'Hello?'

'Yes, Ms. DeMoore,' I spluttered. 'I'm here.'

'I want you to write for me, young man,' she said, unaware that she had further unnerved me by calling me 'young man', a phrase which hadn't been applied to me for some considerable time.

'Do you have a pencil?' Ms DeMoore asked.

'Yes, Ms DeMoore,' I spluttered. 'I do. Why?'

'I want you to take down my address, of course,' she explained.

Having scribbled down the details along with Ms DeMoore's over-complex directions I took a breath to ask when would be . . .

'Wednesday next,' she instructed. 'At four o'clock. Please be punctual. Good day.' And she was gone.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

A few days later, I was in an Amsterdam side street, scraping something sticky off a doorbell to make sure I had the right place and I couldn't have been made to feel more welcome.

I was honoured that Ms DeMoore deigned to give me many audiences (they were very much more than mere interviews) over a period of several months and that she felt comfortable enough to share so much with me. Minimal censorship has been employed to protect the guilty at Ms DeMoore's personal request. I am indebted to her detailed memory, her patience and her unique relationship with the truth. She is a one-off. I think that's what her nephew said, anyway.

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SAINTS AND SINNERS

[PLAY/RECORD]

MS DEMOORE

Now dear, before you get out your paraphernalia, there are one or two rules upon which we should agree lest we undertake our enterprise too rashly.

INTERVIEWER

My paraphernalia, Ms DeMoore?

MS DEMOORE

Your tape recorder and what not.

INTERVIEWER

It's already out, Ms DeMoore. It's here on the table.

MS DEMOORE

I was expecting something much bigger than that.

INTERVIEWER

It's digital.

MS DEMOORE

How modern. Well, then, before you turn it on ...

INTERVIEWER
It's already on.

MS DEMOORE
Where's the big furry thing?

INTERVIEWER
What big furry thing?

MS DEMOORE
I see them when people are interviewed on
television.

INTERVIEWER
Oh, I see. They go over microphones to shield
against noise made by excessive wind.

MS DEMOORE
Will we not need one, dear?

INTERVIEWER
Only if there's going to be excessive wind, Ms
DeMoore.

The conversation shuddered to a halt as Ms DeMoore withered me with a glare so icy it could have frozen volcanic lava. I said, 'I think I may have said something wrong.'

'I'm pleased to hear you say so,' said Ms DeMoore.

I began to feel, once again, like a ten-year old being corrected for a scholastic misdemeanour.

'You will not find me an unreasonable woman,' she said. I found it increasingly difficult to look her in the eye. She continued, 'But I must insist on certain standards of personal and professional conduct.'

I had become engrossed in the diversionary tactic of looking around the room. It was small but comfortable and stylish. Framed costume designs hung on the walls. The glossy magazines on the classically designed coffee table were of the more upmarket variety whose readership would include stylish women who never bought anything ready-to-wear; the ever-rarer species of lady who could still occasionally be spotted wearing expensive hats and sharing lunch in a five-star hotel.

A large ginger cat eyed me suspiciously from under a table.

I suddenly became aware of the silence and that Ms DeMoore was looking at me expectantly. 'Yes, Ms DeMoore,' I said. 'Of course.'

Ms DeMoore continued. 'Personal remarks, insensitivity, double entendres and so on will not be tolerated,' she instructed.

'Naturally, Ms DeMoore,' I mumbled.

Ms DeMoore relaxed. 'Your courtesy relieves my apprehensions,' she said. 'Will my conditions make your job for me any more difficult?'

'It really depends on what the job is,' I said.

Ms DeMoore began to look satisfied with herself, as if she had reached a happy decision after much consideration. 'I want you to write a little piece for me to perform on the legitimate stage.'

I hadn't heard it called "the legitimate stage" for years. There was something about Ms DeMoore that made her at once curiously old-fashioned and yet also a modern woman of the world and she was beginning to fascinate me even while I remained awed by her. 'How exciting,' I said. 'It sounds like a marvellous chance to tell your story to your adoring public at long last.'

'I'm not sure anyone would be interested in my life story,' Ms DeMoore commented. 'No. I want you to write a little stage show for me to perform about my nephew,' she explained. 'My nephew. . .,' Ms DeMoore repeated, her expression relaxed and lit up with these two simple words. It was the first moment of genuine relaxation between us. 'My nephew is the most important person in my life,' she said. 'I am so very proud of him that I wish to perform something as a tribute to him which, I realise, makes it sound as if he has passed away. But nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact he . . . well, I will refrain from giving away any details of the story for the moment. Let us just say that I would like to perform something that records my travels through life and, indeed, halfway around the world with him. Something which marks the marvellous new beginning at which both he and I currently find ourselves.'

Ms DeMoore's enthusiasm was infectious and very touching. I wanted her to continue. I prompted her. 'Your travels with your nephew, Ms DeMoore?'

'Exactly,' she said. 'Something stylish and sophisticated. Something personal yet universally

meaningful. Something with purpose. And it must be entertaining of course. Something that changes people in some little way or other; makes them ask questions, face challenges and look at life through a new lens. And there should be songs. Could you do that?'

The proposition began to feel like an enormous responsibility and Ms DeMoore demonstrated her sensitive ability to read thoughts and feelings. 'Are you up to it?' she asked.

I smiled and replied, somewhat hesitantly, 'We won't know unless we try, will we?'

'That's the spirit,' said Ms DeMoore. 'Anyone can whistle, that's what I always say. You just put your lips together and blow, as Lauren Bacall said to Humphrey Bogart in *To Have And Have Not* in 1944. It's simple.'

I laughed. '1944 was a bit before my time, I'm afraid.'

Ms DeMoore fixed me with a stare. 'Mine too,' she stated bluntly.

'Sorry.' My stress levels rose. 'Anyone can whistle? Is that your philosophy in life?'

'Exactly,' Ms DeMoore smiled. 'I can't lay claim to much originality of sentiment but there is much of value to be gleaned from a carefully selected show tunes. I think it was Noel Coward who commented on the potency of cheap music. Now, where would you like me to begin?'

'Tell me about your first journey with your nephew,' I suggested.

'Oh, that was quite short,' said Ms DeMoore. 'It was to the chapel for his baptism.'

'Chapel? Were you a religious family?'

'Some of us were born religious,' Ms DeMoore began. 'Some of us achieved religion. And some of us had religion thrust upon us, to misquote Shakespeare.'

'Could you explain that?' I requested.

A plan apparently formulated behind Ms DeMoore's noble brow. 'I'd like to show you something of our once exalted but mightily fallen background; I mean, the ashes of the background from whence, phoenix-like, my nephew and I arose.'

'That sounds intriguing,' I said but Ms DeMoore raised a hand and one eyebrow to indicate that her train of thought was still going full steam ahead.

'I had to go back to England recently,' she continued. 'Whilst there I took the opportunity to research my family tree. Let me tell you, there were some fascinating surprises to be found there. My nephew and I have blue blood. Our travels have, if you like, been a royal progression.'

Ms DeMoore revealed, as if from nowhere, a large rolled parchment document which she began to unfurl. 'And here is that tree which, as you will see, positively groans with fruit.'

A muted giggle escaped my lips. Ms DeMoore, being the perfect lady, completely ignored it. She ran her finger up a long branch of the tree starting from her own name at the bottom of the document up to an obviously far distant ancestor.

She spoke. 'As to the religious standing of my family, I would like to draw your attention to

Margaret.' Ms DeMoore pointed at the name, written in ornate copper-plate script. 'What do you notice about Margaret?' Ms DeMoore's demeanour was expectant.

'She's been dead a very long time.' It was the only response I could think of.

I couldn't blame Ms DeMoore for giving me a look which combined disappointment with the kindly sympathy she probably reserved for visits to the sick beds of mere acquaintances. 'We're all dead a long time, dear,' she stated with assurance. 'That's half the point of life; to live it as best you can for as long as you are able. You *do* live your life as best you can, don't you dear?'

Nothing was helping me overcome my nerves. 'I suppose so. I've never really thought about it,' I said.

'Well, you must,' Ms DeMoore instructed. 'Otherwise, why bother? Let me illustrate my point. Margaret was my 25-times great Grandmother and was an absolute saint. No, really. She absolutely was. She was born about 1045 (the year, not the time) into an Anglo-Saxon royal family and rather fortuitously married King Malcolm III of Scotland and became his queen. Just one of many queens in my family.'

'So I gathered,' I heard myself saying before my mind was in gear.

Ms DeMoore raised an eyebrow and cleared her throat pointedly. 'To continue,' she said. 'Margaret was a pious woman, apparently, and spent much of her time in prayer, charitable works and ecclesiastical embroidery. Doesn't that sound

thrilling? However, it does appear to have had a civilizing affect on the more uncouth Malcolm, who couldn't even read. She read him stories from the Bible. She was made a Saint by Pope Innocent IV in 1250. Which reminds me, it must be almost lunch time.'

'Forgive me, Ms DeMoore,' I ventured. 'But I don't see how any of this is relevant to your wanting me to write something for you.'

'My point is, dear,' Ms DeMoore said in a display of her excellent command of patience. 'Fast forward another few hundred years and we arrive at my mother, Emma.' Ms DeMoore pointed at the name just above her own on the family tree and paused while a fleeting look of melancholy clouded her brow. 'Poor Emma,' she continued, pulling herself back to her narrative. 'She came from a very strict family. She had been mad about musicals as a girl and, given the opportunity, I believe she could have had a career on the stage. One of the last things she said to me was, "Give them a show tune and you'll always have friends." But the closest she got to performing music in public was as a Private in the Salvation Army, rattling a tambourine for money to purge her sins. They were big on sin in those days. Nothing specific; just as long as you accepted you were a miserable sinner and spent your life repenting. It was all self-denial and repression.'

'Ah', I said, hoping that I was at last beginning to grasp the point.

'Margaret's saintliness was genuine, you see, dear,' Ms DeMoore explained. 'Whilst my mother's

piousness was more proscribed, forced upon her and therefore far less positive in its effect. You could say our family went from 'holy' to 'holier-than-thou.'

'Are you asking me to write a single stage show, Ms DeMoore?' I enquired. 'I only ask because, between Saint Margaret and your mother, you just skipped through a thousand years of history.'

Ms DeMoore laughed skittishly. 'Skipped? My dear, you flatter me. I haven't skipped since I was a child.'

'But even *War and Peace* doesn't cover that much time,' I explained. 'Who would want to sit through anything that long and bleak?'

Ms DeMoore's response was measured and matter-of-fact. '*Les Miserables* is still doing quite well at the box office, I believe. A tale of poverty, child neglect and suicide, all set to catchy tunes.'

'I see your point,' I said. 'But *Les Miserables* has a huge cast. Are you planning on having a huge cast?'

'No dear,' Ms DeMoore stated. 'Just me.'

'Erm. Right,' I mumbled. 'OK.'

'My stories are not made up, you know. Many of them are a matter of public record.' Ms DeMoore's eyes smiled. 'All those ancient royal connections through dear father mean that my nephew and I are descended from nobility from all over Europe; France, Spain, the Low Countries.'

'Even Scotland,' I offered.